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The Berg Companion to Fashion

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SUBCULTURES

David Muggleton

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A point on which many costume historians have concurred is that fashion, as it is currently understood—the propensity for continual change in clothing designs, colors, and tastes—is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of humankind, virtually unknown before the fourteenth century and occurring only with the emergence of mercantile capitalism, the concomitant growth in global trade, and the rise of the medieval city. (Among the few exceptions are Tang Dynasty China and Heian Period Japan.) Other scholars have analyzed fashion as an aspect of a distinctively modern and Western consumer culture that first gained impetus in the eighteenth century, concurrent with the onset of the industrial revolution. Either to be “fashionable” in this sense of the term must not be understood as a natural, universal, or biologically given aspect of human behavior, but a socially and historically specific condition. Fashion is, in other words, a cultural construction. Its very existence, form, and direction are dependent on the complex interplay of quite specific economic, political, and ideological forces.

If fashion is cultural then fashion subcultures are groups organized around or based upon certain features of costume, appearance, and adornment that render them distinctive enough to be recognized or defined as a subset of the wider culture. Depending on the group in question, subcultures may be loosely or tightly bounded; their collective identification may be self-attributed or imputed to them by outsiders. A particular gender, age span, social class, or ethnic identity may dominate membership. Subcultures often create their own distinctiveness by defining themselves in opposition to the “mainstream”—the accepted, prescribed, or prevailing fashion of the period. They may be either radical and forward-looking and reactionary and conservative in relation to the dominant mode of dressing: in either case, they aim toward exclusivity. Thus, while these subcultures may depend upon fashion for their very existence, their members may dispute the relevance of fashion (as both phenomenon and terminology) to their own identity, perhaps preferring to orient themselves around the idea of “style” or “anti-fashion.” “Anti-fashion is that ‘true chic’ which uses the elegance that never draws attention to itself, the simplicity that is ‘understated’ & Anti-fashion attempts a timeless style, trying to get the essential element of change out of fashion altogether” (Wilson, pp. 183–184).

Early Examples

Elizabeth Wilson's *Adorned in Dreams* includes a useful introductory discussion of certain forms of early, European fashion subcultures that were rebellious, or oppositional, dress. Along with the “great masculine renunciation” of the early nineteenth century, in which men forsook foppish and perfumed effeminacy for classic understated sobriety, came the figure of the Regency dandy. Although English in origin, dandyism soon found resonance in post-revolutionary France, where it was adopted by the avant-garde youth subculture, the Incroyables. The typical dandy was undoubtedly motivated by a narcissistic obsession with image, display, and the presentation of the self through dress; yet his overriding concern was with sheer quality of fabric, fit, and form, not overbearing or ostentatious ornamentation. This coterie of young gentlemen was thus characterized by an ethos of stoical heroism, a disciplined quest for refinement, elegance, and excellence, the diverse historical legacy of which can be seen in male Edwardian dress, the 1960s mod subculture, and the character of John Steed in the cult TV show, *The Avengers*.

The fastidiousness of the dandy can be contrasted with the flamboyance of the bohemian, who also emerged in the early nineteenth century, a romantic reaction against the perceived de-humanizing utilitarianism and rationalism of the industrial revolution. Although often solidly upper middle class in origin, the romantic rebel—as artist, visionary, or intellectual—was fundamentally anti-bourgeois in tastes and outlook, their quest for self-renewal through art synonymous with a desire to escape the inhibitions of conventional lifestyles and appearances. Bohemian countercultures have been a feature of many major Western urban centers of creativity—Paris, London, New York, Berlin, San Francisco—at regular intervals over the past two hundred years. From the casual neckties, romantic robes, and ethnic exoticism of the early French bohemian via the existentially inspired black uniform and pale complexions of the 1950s beatniks, to the natural fibers, Eastern-influenced designs, and psychedelic aesthetic of the 1960s hippies, Wilson's book provides descriptions of their many and varied forms of sartorial dissent.

Because calls to free the physical self from the strictures imposed by social conventions of dress can imply a need for either increased functionality of design or a relaxation of hitherto too rigid forms, oppositional fashions and attempts at reformist dress can display both puritan rational and aesthetic romantic elements. Artistic or aesthetic dress of the nineteenth century called for the natural and free-flowing draping of the female at a time when the tightly corseted, narrow-waisted, and heavily bustled female was the height of popular fashion; yet it is interesting that a movement founded in 1881 to free women from precisely these restrictions and impediments of conventional Victorian dress should be called the Rational Dress Society.” In the Soviet Union of the 1920s, the rational aspects of dress design were underpinned by the scientific tenets of Marxism-Leninism. Constructivist artists such as Vladimir Tatlin, Liubov' Popova, and Varvara Stepanova combined geometric Modernist motifs with the principle that form follows function to address the utilitarian clothing needs of urban industrial workers. The resulting revolutionary garments, intended for mass production, were destined, however, to remain—like aesthetic dress—a minority taste—the artistic expression of an avant-garde subculture.

Youth Subcultural Styles

The British context. Despite assumptions to the contrary, working-class youth subcultures, based around distinctive, dissenting styles, were confined to the period after World War II. Geoffrey Pearson, for example, in a study of the “history of respectable fears,” notes the presence in nineteenth-century Britain of the troublesome teenage “hooligan” (an Australian equivalent of the same period was known as the “larrikin”). Notwithstanding some regional variations in style between the different hooligan groups—the Manchester “Scuttlers” and the Birmingham “Pe Blinders,” for example—there was adopted a quite distinct uniform of large boots, bell-bottomed trousers, a loosely worn muffler or scarf, and peaked cap worn over a donkey-fringe haircut. The whole peculiar ensemble was set off with a broad, buckled, leather belt.

There were six or more intervening decades between the demise of the original “hooligans” and the emergence of the more familiar and clear documented British youth subcultures of the post-1945 era—the teddy boys, mods, rockers, hippies, skinheads, and punks. Yet Pearson sees a fundamental difference between the way the Victorian gangs constructed clearly recognizable styles by appropriating elements from the range of fashionable sources available to them and the attempts by the more recent “spectacular” youth subcultures to create new, oppositional meaning through the recontextualization of raw commodities from the market—a process that the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at University of Birmingham, England, termed “bricolage.” Hence, the working-class teddy boys of the early 1950s appropriated the long-labeled Edwardian drape suit from exclusive London tailors who aimed to bring back the pre-1914 look for upper-class young men. But the teds combed this item with bootlace ties (from Western movies), greased-back haircuts, drainpipe trousers, and thick creped-soled shoes.

CCCS writers such as John Clarke and Dick Hebdige had adopted an analysis whereby subcultural styles were “decoded” or read as a text for hidden meanings. Hence, the fastidious and narcissistic neatness of the mods, with their two-tone mohair suits, button-down collared shirts, and short, lacquered hair, could be interpreted as an attempt by young working-class people in menial and routine employment to live out on a symbolic level the affluent, consumerist, and classless aspirations of the early 1960s. By contrast, the skinheads who emerged later in the same decade typically sported very close-cropped hair or shaven heads, Ben Sherman shirts and suspenders, and short, tight jeans or sta-press trousers and Martens boots—a combination of elements that signified a “magical” desire to return to the puritan masculinity of a rapidly disappearing traditional proletarian lifestyle. By the end of the 1970s subcultural fashions had become less easy to decipher in this way. Hebdige, analyzing punk style in his classic text *Subculture*, was driven to assert that the punks’ “cut-up” wardrobe of bondage trousers, school ties, safety pins, bin liners, and hair signified meaningfully only in terms of its very meaninglessness, as a visual illustration of chaos.

American and Australian examples. In Britain during the early 1960s, the natural enemy of the cool, clean-looking, scooter-riding mods were leather and denim-clad, insignia-decorated, greasy-haired rockers, or motorbike boys as Paul Willis called them, renowned for their macho, rock and roll image and “ton-up” speeding runs on heavy-duty Triumph Bonneville. Yet the reputation of the British rockers was tame by comparison with the notoriety of the American “outlaw” biker gangs of the postwar era, the most famous of which were—and still are—the Hell’s Angels. Organized territorially in “chapters,” and espousing an ideology of personal freedom and conservative patriotism, the “Angels” rode their collective “runs” of “chopped hogs”—customized Harley-Davidson bikes. Their famous Death-Head emblem or logo, as described by Hunter Thompson, is a cloth patch embroidered with a biker helmet atop a winged skull, and a band inscribed with the words Hell’s Angels and the local chapter name. Their “colors,” as they are known, are typically sewn to the back of a sleeveless denim shirt.

Heavy Metal is a rock music genre that has given rise to a virtually global fashion, arguably derived from a crossover of elements from biker, punk, and hippie culture. Headbangers or metalers, as they are known, are characterized by their typical dress of black T-shirt, often bearing a heavy metal band name, faded denim jeans, and a leather or denim jacket, perhaps decorated with various badges, patches, and band insignia. For men and women, hair is usually long, the body or arms are often tattooed, and jewelry may be worn. The music itself has fragmented into various subgenres such as thrash-, death- and sleaze-metal, each with its own variant on the general metaler look. Jeffrey Arnett views young American metalheads (as they are named in the title of his book) as particularly prone to the alienation, anomie, and hyper-individualism that, from his perspective, characterize contemporary American youth more generally.

The New Avengers.



The stars of the 1970s British television series *The New Avengers*, (from left to right) Gareth Hunt, Joanna Lumley, and Patrick McNee. McNee’s character, John Steed, epitomized the style of the later-day Edwardian dandy.

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Because of the immense power of its market, and the dependence of subcultural fashions upon commodity production and consumption, styles originally developed or popularized in America have rapidly spread to other cultural contexts. In a chapter in Rob White’s edited book on the Australian experience of youth subcultures, Stratton discusses the case of the 1950s bodgies and widgees—terms used to denote male and female members respectively. The style of the bodgie and widgee was originally jazz- and jive-oriented and loosely derived from the zoot suit (discussed below) worn by young black and Hispanic Americans in the 1940s. Later, however, this Australian subculture became influenced by American culture and also began to incorporate elements from rock ‘n’ roll. Boys wore leather jackets or drapes with thin ties, drainpipe trousers, and wide-toe picker shoes; girls had pencil skirts, stilettos or pedal-pusher shoes, and beehive or ponytail hairstyles.

Neglected Dimensions and New Developments

Gender and ethnicity. In a chapter in *Resistance through Rituals*, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber noted that most of the subcultures and styles examined by the CCCS appeared overwhelmingly male in both composition and orientation. They concluded that girls *had* actually been present in such subcultures, but were rendered marginalized and invisible by the masculinist bias of the writers. It was only with the publication nearly a quarter of a century later of *Pretty in Punk*, Lauren Leblanc's noteworthy text on Canadian female punk rockers, that females in a male-dominated style subculture were studied comprehensively, in their own right and on their own terms. Leblanc's sample displayed a range of post-signifiers, including hair brightly dyed and worn in a Mohawk style, facial piercings, tattoos, and the "street-" or gutter-punk look—dark, baggy shirts and trousers with black boots. Leblanc concludes that women's presence in a largely male punk subculture can be explained by the way membership enables them to resist certain normative and stylistic aspects of fashionable (i.e. mainstream) femininity.

Although ethnicity, like gender, has been a relatively neglected dimension in the writings of subcultural style, the American "zooties" of the 1940s are one of the better-documented examples of black and Hispanic rebellious fashion. Derived from black, hipster jazz culture, the zoot suit comprised an oversized, draped and pleated jacket with hugely padded shoulders, worn with high-waisted, baggy-kneed and ankle-taped pants often set off with a wide-brimmed hat worn over a ducktail hairstyle. During a period of wartime rationing of material, the wearing of such an extravagant, luxurious, and ostentatious style led to rising tensions between the young black and Hispanic male zooties and white U.S. servicemen, sparking off full-scale riots in a number of U.S. cities.

Within the British literature on subcultures, the ethnic dimension has been more typically viewed in terms of the effects of postwar British "race relations" and black style on the formation of indigenous rebellious youth fashions. A noted example of such an approach is Dick Hebdige's discussion of the Jamaican rude boy and Rastafarian subcultures. Elements from the first of these styles—the cool look, shades, porkpie hat, slim trousers with cropped legs—fed first into 1960s mod and then the Two-Tone movement of the late 1970s. Rastafarians, to symbolize the oppression by white society (Babylon) and their prophesied return to Zion (Africa), have adopted knitted caps (called "tams"), scarves, and jeans in red, gold, and green, the colors of the Ethiopian flag. It is, though, the Rasta's dreadlock hairstyle that has most significantly been taken up by certain groups of white youth, particularly new-age hippies and anarchopunks, to show subcultural disaffection toward the dominant social order.

Post-Modernism and Post-Subculture

The practice of borrowing ethnic signifiers has reached extreme proportions in the contemporary, transatlantic example of the Modern Primitivist subculture. The chapter by Winge, in David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl's *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, details how this subculture with largely white membership adopts aspects of so-called "primitive" tribal cultures, such as black-work tattoos, brandings, keloids, and septum piercings. While subcultural styles have typically been constructed by a borrowing of elements from other sources, this relocation of traditional elements in a modern, urban setting could be seen as a prime example of a tendency toward a more complex cross-fertilization of time-compressed stylistic symbols in an increasingly global context. It is further argued that the identities fashioned from these diverse sources are themselves ever more eclectic, hybrid, and fragmented. Such a position has led some writers to proclaim that subculture—traditionally used to denote a coherent, stable, and specific group identification—is no longer a useful concept by which to comprehend these so-called "post-modern" or "post-subcultural" characteristics of contemporary styles.

That attempts at reconceptualizing the term sub-culture, such as "neo-tribe," or "post-subculture," have proceeded on the terrain of post-modernism owes much to the American anthropologist Ted Polhemus. His *Streetstyle* is particularly worth singling out here, most obviously for its vividly illustrated genealogy of late-twentieth-century subcultures, from the 1940s zootsuits to the 1990s new-age travelers, but also for its attempt in final chapters to conceptualize a new stage of development in the history of popular street fashion—"the supermarket of style." "Those who frequent the Supermarket of Style display a stylistic promiscuity which is breathtaking in its casualness. 'Punks' one day, 'Hippies' the next, it's a fleeting leap across ideological divides—converting the history of street style into a vast theme park. All of which fits very neatly within postmodern theory" (Polhemus, p. 131).

Muggleton's *Inside Subculture* represents the first attempt to test such theoretical propositions about post-modern fashions. Using data from interviews with members from a range of subcultures, Muggleton generally agrees with post-modern claims concerning the fluidity, fragmentation, and radical individuality of dissident youth styles. He describes, for example, those such as the respondent with a Chinese hairstyle, baggy skateboarder shorts, leather biker jacket, and boots, whose eclecticism arguably leads them to disavow any affiliation to a group identity. Paul Hodkinson's *Goth* is a qualitative study of self-identifying members of the gothic subculture. Both male and female goths are noted for their dark and macabre appearance, typical features being black clothes, whitened faces, long, dyed black hair, plus dark eyeliner and lipstick. *Goth* differs somewhat from *Inside Subculture* in its stress on the continuing cultural coherence and stylistic substance of the British subcultural scene. The potential reader is advised to seek out these two texts for their complementary rather than conflicting assessments of the contemporary fashion subculture situation.

See also Extreme Fashions; [Punk](#); [Retro Styles](#); [Zoot Suit](#).

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Urban Menswear in Australia

Encyclopedia

Vicki Karaminas

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

Australia was relatively sparsely populated with Europeans until the discovery of gold in 1851. Immigration, together with increased urbanization and industrialization, led to growing prosperity for its colonies. A new class of professional city men, civil servants and entrepreneurs, emerge. While the governing class had always looked to Britain for their styles of fashionable dress, men abandoned the diversity of everyday town dress in the early colonies and began to conform to European standards.

Fashion Photography in Australia

Encyclopedia

Daniel Palmer and Kate Rhodes

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

Australian fashion photography has a relatively short history, starting with the earliest examples of fashion advertisements from the beginning of the twentieth century through to the popularization of the genre in Australia via the work of modernist photographers such as Max Dupain and the postwar heyday of Helmut Newton and others. An exploration of the strong voice of independent publishers who have helped to market Australian fashion and style is noted and includes the internationally recognized

Independent Australian Fashion

Encyclopedia

Danielle Whitfield

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

Straddling the boundaries between art, craft, and fashion, independent fashion design first emerged as a defiant new aesthetic and mode of cultural production in Australia during the mid-1970s. An energetic current that introduced new visual and conceptual models to Australian fashion, independent fashion culture quickly became the radical alternative to existing mainstream and commercial, or traditional (European) fashion systems. Fundamental to the movement was the endeavor to situate contemporary

Global Positioning of Australian Fashion

Encyclopedia

Robyn Healy

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Australia, New Zealand, and the Pacific Islands*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

Over the years Australia has found it difficult to establish a presence in the fashion centers of Europe and the United States. Yet when Sydney fashion designer Collette Dinnigan staged a full-scale parade in the 1995 official Paris ready-to-wear calendar, it changed forever the perception of Australian fashion as being somewhat out of touch. This defining moment sparked debate and extensive media coverage about a new wave of emerging designers and was crucial in the development of the local industry.

Kuba Dress and Textiles

Encyclopedia

Elisabeth L. Cameron

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Africa*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

Dress in the Kuba kingdom (Democratic Republic of Congo), whether daily wear or ceremonial, marks both rank and prosperity. Men's and women's festive dress is an ensemble of skirt, hat, and other beaded and decorated accessories. Rank is indicated through the use of specific items such as eagle or owl feathers, the wearing of certain skirt styles, and restriction of some metals. The density and rarity of added materials demonstrates the resources a family or clan can control and thus their affluence.

Equatorial Guinea

Encyclopedia

Enrique Okenve

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Africa*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

The tiny central African country of Equatorial Guinea covers only 28,051 square kilometers (11,000 square miles). It is comprised of a few islands of which Bioko—formerly known as Fernando Po—off the coast of Cameroon is the largest, and a 26,000-square-kilometer (10,000-square-mile) mainland territory known as Rio Muni nestled between Cameroon and Gabon. With European expansionism, these territories were ceded in 1848 from Portugal to Spain, but the Spaniards did not arrive until 1858. During the

Gabon

Encyclopedia

Judith Knight and Rachel Jean-Baptiste

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Africa*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

Gabon, a Central African country, is located on the Atlantic coast, bordered by Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, and the Republic of Congo. Historically, Central African societies attach significance to a person's dress in indicating identity, societal standing, and specific events or moments of importance to individuals or communities. Many Central African peoples in the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries wore few clothes. However, clothing, bodily adornment, and hairstyles and headdresses that

Fang of Equatorial Guinea and Gabon

Encyclopedia

Louis P. Perrois

Translated by Francine Farr

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Africa*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

The Fang of equatorial Africa dazzled all who crossed their path of east-to-west migration toward the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf of Guinea that in the early twentieth century. In 1843, U.S. pastor John Wilson noted, as quoted in Merlet's *Le pays des trois estuaires, 1471–1900*, that they "naked except for a bark loincloth Their hair hangs in braids. They carry knives, spears, and many iron objects they make themselves." In French naval lieutenant Méquet, plying the Como River on the

Ethiopia

Encyclopedia

Peri M. Klemm

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Africa*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

The array of dress styles in Ethiopia is vast. Often dress is meaningful on several levels and may indicate age, status, political membership, religious belief, and ethnic affiliation. Each culture within Ethiopia has its own unique style of dress. The abundance of dress styles in Ethiopia is largely due to the diversity of climate, geography, and culture. Ethiopian geography is divided into the highland and lowland regions. The Ethiopian population of seventy-five million is made up of some eighty

Global Denim

Encyclopedia

Daniel Miller and Sophie Woodward

Source: *Berg Encyclopedia of World Dress and Fashion. Global Perspectives*, 2010, Berg Fashion Library

Although blue jeans appear to be the most common garment worn in today's world, accounting for nearly half of what people wear in many countries on a given day, there is almost no literature on denim in the contemporary world. The Global Denim Project was established to try to explain why people wear denim. Arguments from history or commerce are insufficient to explain. Instead this article reflects on four key qualities. That the bulk of denim is cheap and generic rather than designer produced.

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